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Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor in EFL Academic Writing: Theory and Pedagogical Applications

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Abstract

Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor (IGM) is an important concept in Systemic Functional Linguistics. It refers to the expression of interpersonal meanings such as modality, obligation, and attitude through indirect or incongruent grammatical structures instead of direct modal verbs or mood choices. This paper first introduces the basic theory of IGM and then explores its applications in EFL academic writing instruction. IGM enables writers to express politeness, hedge claims, enhance objectivity, and improve the overall formality of academic texts. However, many EFL students tend to rely heavily on simple congruent forms, which makes their writing sound too direct, personal, or informal. This paper suggests practical teaching methods, including awareness-raising activities, contrastive rewriting exercises, and guided production tasks. It aims to bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice and help teachers improve students' academic writing skills.

Keywords

Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor; Systemic Functional Linguistics; academic writing; EFL teaching; Grammatical metaphor

1. Introduction

Academic writing in English is not only about presenting ideas clearly but also about managing interpersonal relationships with readers. Writers must express their stance properly, show appropriate politeness, hedge uncertain claims, and construct an objective voice. Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor (IGM) serves as a powerful linguistic resource to achieve these goals in academic discourse.

1.1. Background and Significance

The concept of grammatical metaphor was first proposed by Halliday and has been further developed in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). While ideational

grammatical metaphor has attracted much attention, interpersonal grammatical metaphor has become increasingly important in recent years because of its great value in academic and professional communication (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Liardét, 2018).

In congruent realizations, interpersonal meanings are expressed in the most direct and natural way. For example, probability is shown by "probably," obligation by modal verbs like "must," and commands by imperative sentences. In contrast, interpersonal grammatical metaphor realizes these meanings through indirect grammatical resources, such as projecting clauses, nominalized structures, or embedded constructions. A typical example is changing the direct form "You must submit the report tomorrow" into the more metaphorical "It is essential that the report be submitted by tomorrow." Another common case is using "It is widely accepted that..." instead of "I think..." to present ideas more objectively.

In the EFL context, IGM is especially significant for Chinese students. Therefore, raising students' awareness of IGM can greatly improve their writing competence (Liardét, 2018; Zhou, 2024; Wang, 2010).

Many university students can express basic ideas fluently, but their academic writing often sounds too personal or direct because they overuse simple modal verbs and first-person statements. This style does not meet the requirements of international academic writing, which values objectivity, caution, and politeness. Research shows that effective use of IGM is closely related to the overall quality and sophistication of academic texts. Therefore, raising students' awareness of IGM and helping them practice it can greatly improve their writing competence and prepare them better for further studies or international communication (Liardét, 2018; Zhou, 2024).

1.2. Research Purpose

This paper has two main purposes. First, it aims to provide a clear and accessible introduction to the definition, main types, and functions of Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor based on SFL theory. Second, it seeks to explore practical pedagogical applications and offer useful teaching suggestions for EFL academic writing classrooms. By connecting theory with teaching practice, this paper hopes to offer valuable guidance to both researchers and English teachers.

1.3. Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical foundations of IGM, including its definition and major types. Section 3 focuses on pedagogical applications and provides concrete teaching suggestions and classroom examples. The final section summarizes the key points and puts forward recommendations for future teaching and research.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor

2.1. Definition and Essence

Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor (IGM) is a key concept in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It refers to the expression of interpersonal meanings such as modality, obligation, and attitude through indirect or incongruent grammatical structures rather than direct and typical forms. In congruent realizations, interpersonal meanings are expressed in the most straightforward way. For example, probability can be shown directly by words like "probably," obligation by modal verbs like "must," and commands by imperative sentences such as "Open the window." In metaphorical realizations, however, these meanings are re-expressed through other grammatical resources, such as projecting clauses, nominalized structures, or longer embedded constructions. This shift from congruent to metaphorical forms creates a more indirect, formal, and flexible way of expressing interpersonal meanings. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) point out that such metaphorical forms greatly expand the meaning potential of language and are particularly useful in written academic discourse where formality and objectivity are required.

2.2. Major Types of IGM

Scholars generally identify three main types of interpersonal grammatical metaphor. The first type is metaphors of modality. Modality includes modalization, which expresses probability or usuality, and modulation, which expresses obligation or inclination. For instance, instead of saying "She will probably come," a metaphorical form would be "It is likely that she will come." Similarly, instead of the direct expression "You must leave now," writers may use "I insist that you leave now" or "It is necessary for you to leave now." These metaphorical expressions make the language sound more formal, polite, and less face-threatening (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013; Taverniers, 2008; He & Yang, 2018).

The second type is metaphors of mood. This type involves expressing commands, questions, or offers in indirect ways. A typical example is using a polite question such as "Could you open the window?" instead of the direct imperative "Open the window." In academic writing, mood metaphors are frequently used to soften suggestions or requests. For example, instead of writing "Universities should provide more support," students can learn to write "It is suggested that universities should provide more support." This kind of shift shows respect to readers and improves the overall tone of the text (Thompson, 2014).

The third type is metaphors of person or evaluation, which are often realized through projecting clauses. Writers frequently use expressions like "I think that...," "It is believed that...," or "The study suggests that..." to present their stance. These structures allow writers to distance themselves from the proposition and make their arguments appear more objective and academic(Liardét, 2018; Zhou, 2024; Yang, 2013). For instance, changing "I believe environmental problems are serious" into

"It is widely believed that environmental problems are becoming increasingly serious" can greatly enhance the academic quality of the writing (Liardét, 2018; Zhou, 2024).

2.3. Functions of IGM in Academic Discourse

IGM plays several important roles in academic writing. First, it helps writers achieve politeness and maintain good interpersonal relationships with readers by softening direct statements or commands. Second, it enables writers to hedge their claims, which means expressing ideas with appropriate caution rather than sounding too certain. This is very important in academic contexts because strong claims usually need sufficient evidence and careful wording. Third, IGM increases the objectivity and formality of the text. By using structures such as "It is suggested that..." instead of "I suggest...," writers can make their arguments sound more neutral and authoritative.

Overall, the appropriate use of IGM is regarded as a sign of advanced language proficiency and discourse sophistication. Many studies have found that expert academic writers use IGM more frequently and effectively than novice writers, including most EFL students (Liardét, 2018; Yang, 2013; Zhou, 2024). Therefore, understanding and mastering IGM is essential for students who want to improve the quality of their academic writing and succeed in international academic communication.

3. Pedagogical Applications in EFL Academic Writing

3.1. Problems in Current EFL Academic Writing Teaching

Although IGM is very important for academic writing, many EFL students still have limited awareness of it. Most Chinese university students tend to use simple and direct expressions. They frequently use modal verbs such as "must," "should," and "can," and personal statements like "I think," "I believe," and "In my opinion." These congruent forms make their writing sound too informal, direct, or even childish. As a result, their academic papers often lack objectivity, politeness, and the formal tone required in international journals and conferences (Liardét, 2018).

Many English teachers in China focus mainly on vocabulary building, basic grammar rules, and general essay structure, but pay little attention to advanced interpersonal resources like IGM. Students may know some modal verbs, but they do not understand how to use metaphorical forms to make their writing more academic. This gap between SFL theory and actual classroom practice needs to be addressed urgently if we want to help students produce higher-quality academic texts.

3.2. Teaching Suggestions

Teachers can adopt a step-by-step approach to help students master IGM effectively. The teaching process can be divided into four main stages.

First, teachers should raise students' awareness. In this stage, the teacher explains the concept of congruent and metaphorical expressions with simple examples and discusses why metaphorical forms are preferred in academic writing. Showing authentic examples from journal articles can help students see the real value of IGM.

Second, controlled practice through contrastive rewriting exercises is highly effective. Students start with simple congruent sentences and rewrite them into metaphorical versions. This helps them become familiar with common patterns.

Third, teachers should design guided production tasks. Students can be asked to write short paragraphs on academic topics while trying to use at least five IGM expressions.

Finally, peer review and teacher feedback play an important role. Students exchange their writing and comment on each other's use of IGM. The teacher can then provide targeted feedback and highlight good examples in class.

These activities are practical and flexible. They can be integrated into regular academic writing courses without requiring too much extra time. With consistent practice over one or two semesters, most students can show noticeable improvement in their writing style (Yang, 2013; Huang & Yu, 2021).

3.3. Teaching Examples

In classroom teaching, teachers can use a variety of clear and practical examples.

For metaphors of modality, students can practice changing "Students must read many books" into "It is necessary for students to read a wide range of academic books." Another example is rewriting "The government should solve this problem quickly" as "It is essential that the government take immediate measures to solve this problem."

For metaphors of mood, instead of writing the direct command "Universities should provide more support," students can learn to use "It is strongly recommended that universities should provide more financial and academic support." This makes suggestions sound much more polite and academic.

For metaphors of person or evaluation, students can replace "I believe environmental problems are serious" with "It is widely believed that environmental problems are becoming increasingly serious and require immediate attention from both governments and individuals."

Teachers can also create matching exercises, sentence transformation drills, and paragraph rewriting tasks. For example, give students a paragraph full of direct expressions and ask them to improve it by adding IGM. In addition, teachers can collect sample sentences from real research articles in fields such as education, economics, or environmental science to show students how expert writers naturally use these metaphors.

Through repeated practice, imitation, and analysis of authentic texts, students can gradually internalize IGM patterns. This will not only improve their writing quality

but also increase their confidence when writing academic papers or applying for overseas study (Liardét, 2018; Zhou, 2024; Chen & He, 2024).

4. Conclusion

In summary, Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor is a valuable resource in academic writing. It helps writers express interpersonal meanings in indirect, polite, and objective ways. This paper has introduced the definition, main types, and important functions of IGM, and has also discussed practical teaching methods for EFL classrooms.

Explicit and systematic teaching of IGM can effectively help EFL students improve the quality, formality, and persuasiveness of their academic writing (Yang, 2013; Zhou, 2024). Teachers are strongly encouraged to include IGM instruction in their writing courses and provide students with sufficient awareness-raising, practice, and feedback opportunities.

However, this paper is mainly theoretical and suggestive in nature. Future studies could conduct empirical classroom experiments to test the actual effectiveness of different IGM teaching methods on students' writing performance. It is hoped that more researchers and teachers will pay attention to this area so that Chinese EFL students can make greater progress in academic communication.

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